



Lost and lonely on the Khao San Road

PHIL SEN relives his first-day nerves on the road where backpacking careers begin

With a squeal of elderly brakes, the taxi disgorged me, jetlagged and perplexed, at the open mouth of the tourist trap. Immediately I was beset by more cab drivers, who wouldn't take the hint that having just got out of one, I didn't need another. I was here. Bangkok's notorious Khao San Road. The KSR.

Fenced off to traffic, the neon-clad street pulsated with locals hawking everything from hooky T-shirts to knock-off Rolexes. The smell of a thousand satays and banana pancakes floated from the food stalls, mingling with the sound of disco music booming from bars and restaurants. Soft-featured Thais of indeterminate gender stalked the pavement like cats marking out their territory. And everywhere, there were 'travellers' shuffling under the burdens of backpacks and dreadlocks. My short-back-and-sides haircut, Timberland walking boots and TopMan T-shirt were as out of place here as an Old Etonian in Albert Square.

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Khao San Road is the bolt that fastens it to the axle. No longer supported by the cushion of a London salary, having traded professional ennui for a year 'going travelling', I had ventured here for its promise of budget accommodation. Need a cheap spot to lodge with cold beer, hip music and hundreds of fellow Brits, but don't want to sell out on your adventurer's credentials? Come to the KSR.

After an hour of aimless dithering in search of a guesthouse through Bangkok's steaming heat, I settled on Ranee's, a diminutive hostel tucked into an alley backed up against the KSR's main strip. The convivial South African landlord, 'Roo', escorted me to the cheapest room, a 120-Baht (£1.80), sweltering, corrugated iron box not dissimilar to Alec Guinness's cell in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. I had clearly overdone it on the budgeting thing; yet I had arrived. I was a 'traveller'. Now I just needed a hot shower, a pint of Best and the *News at Ten*.

Disappointed on all three counts, I soon considered myself lucky to be with-

in 10 paces of the outdoor squat toilet. And at least everyone spoke English.

Ranee's adjoining restaurant was frequented by a cosmopolitan clientele. As I settled down with a dish so piquant it made my nose flood, I was invited to join a middle-aged couple who exported handicrafts for a Brighton gift shop. Old hands at this game, they were eager to dispense their wisdom. How much, for example, did I pay for my taxi from the airport?

'About 300 Baht (£4.50),' I announced. 'I haggled the driver down from 400.'

'Oh dear. We never pay more than 30.'

They'd made their point - and I'd learnt my place in the KSR 'authentic traveller' hierarchy.

Immortalised in Alex Garland's novel *The Beach*, the KSR is as vibrant as it is seedy, as atmospheric as it is commercial. It encapsulates everything that is Asia and everything that is not. Each inch of its half-mile stretch is devoted to that formless breed, the 'traveller': not only does it teem with cheap hostels and internet cafes but the many tour agencies provide countless choices for further adventures.

During the next year, from Chiang Mai to Saigon, then to Jakarta, Sydney and back, again and again I found myself transiting via the Khao San Road. I discovered the New J and Joe's guesthouse, a better class of KSR dive. Four walls, a bed, a fan, a cold shower and a real toilet for just 300 Baht (£4.50) a night. Luxury.

I settled into the Bangkok routine. Pitch up at the KSR, find a room, get something to eat, go for a drink, meet somebody new. A few you come across have clearly been there for some time. These wizened permanent residents are one of KSR's clichés, though nothing to be scared of. Approached with caution and a beer or two, even the most hardened crusties can be a valuable source of advice.

Another cliché is the earnest gap-year student. A popular KSR pastime is spotting the difference between the ones just starting out and the ones on their way back. The former clutch pristine *Lonely Planet* guidebooks while having their hair braided. The latter slope around with battered, dirty rucksacks and battered, dirty faces.

My last day in Thailand was spent thus, as a longer-haired barfly quietly absorbing the fusion of Asian and European cultures in the KSR's melting pot. But just as the evening party cycle commenced, the airport minibus was already sweeping me back towards England and reality. As I glanced behind me I couldn't help feeling a tinge of loss. The Khao San Road is an essential part of the Asian travel experience. Love it or hate it, it's hard to avoid it. ●